

# The RAND Corporation

1700 MAIN ST. SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

27 January 1965

L-2046

Mr. Henry S. Rowen  
Deputy Assistant Secretary  
for Planning and North Atlantic Affairs  
Office of Assistant Secretary  
for International Security Affairs  
Department of Defense  
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Harry:

Following your letters of October 14 and December 21, 1964, we invited Mr. Joel Westbrook of Waco, Texas to a conference in our Washington Office to discuss his thesis about the possible use of "brainwashing" techniques in South Vietnam. We found the conversations with Mr. Westbrook stimulating and decided to try to add a few questions to our next round of interviews in South Vietnam to test his thesis. You will find our tentative conclusions on this problem in the enclosure to this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Guy J. Pauker

GJP:jas

Enclosure: Does the Viet Cong Movement Use "Brainwashing" Techniques?, January 1965

cc: Colonel Marshall E. Sanders  
Chief, Coordinating Division  
Policy Planning Staff

Mr. Daniel Ellsberg ✓  
Special Assistant



DOES THE VIET CONG MOVEMENT USE "BRAINWASHING" TECHNIQUES?

Comments based on conversations with Mr. Joel Westbrook of Waco, Texas, by John C. Donnell, Guy J. Pauker, and Joseph J. Zasloff, The RAND Corporation, January 1965

NOTE: Meetings with Mr. Westbrook were held in Washington on January 13 and 14 following letters of September 10, 1964 from Joel Westbrook to President Lyndon Johnson and Walter Jenkins; letters of September 16 and October 2, 1964 from Walter Jenkins to Joel Westbrook; letter of October 14, 1964 from Henry Rowen to Guy Pauker; letter of December 8, 1964 from Bill Moyers to Joel Westbrook; letter of December 21, 1964 from Henry Rowen to Guy Pauker; letter of January 15, 1965 from Joel Westbrook to Guy Pauker.

Mr. Westbrook has had a keen interest in Communist coercive political indoctrination techniques ever since he served as counsel for defendant Corporal Claude Batchelor in the Korean POW "brainwashing" case. He has interviewed other persons such as Robert Vogler (detained by the Hungarian Communists) who have been subjected to such psychological processes, and he has consulted with psychiatrists knowledgeable on the subject and has familiarized himself with a quantity of psychiatric literature. He had written President Johnson to offer his tentative conclusion that Vietcong political and intelligence successes in South Vietnam might be due in large part to their use of brainwashing techniques and to offer his assistance to anyone interested in studying the matter further. Mr. Walter Jenkins of the White House staff replied to Mr. Westbrook that RAND, in cooperation with DOD, was conducting a study of

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Vietcong Motivation. He thereupon sent a copy of his correspondence with Mr. Westbrook to DOD. Mr. Henry Rowen transmitted copies of this correspondence to Guy Pauker at RAND, who invited Mr. Westbrook to a conference in Washington. John Donnell, Guy Pauker, and Joseph Zasloff met with Mr. Westbrook on January 13-14. Mr. Westbrook brought along a voluminous file concerning "brainwashing."

Early in these discussions with Mr. Westbrook, he defined the present problem as follows:

(A) It appeared necessary to determine first whether clinical proof could be obtained that the Vietcong rely heavily on methods used by the Chinese and other Communists of "making their revolutionary subalterns mentally ill in order to secure their dedicated cooperation." "Subalterns" here include Vietcong cadres and the small number of American POW's known to be in Vietcong hands.

(B) The data thus obtained could be used to do two things:

1) Develop prophylactic techniques enabling persons to resist brainwashing; and

2) Devise anti-Vietcong propaganda exposing the insidious and ingenious nature of these techniques.

A central and obvious problem that emerges here is making a useful distinction between the Vietcong's "ordinary" political indoctrination techniques, which

have certain coercive aspects, and the specific concept of brainwashing, thought control or "induced political psychosis" (the term of Dr. Joost Meerloo). Coercive political indoctrination of the "ordinary" type may include such tactics as "softening up" villagers by political assassinations creating anxiety among them (often while simultaneously winning their favor by directing the assassinations against hated exploiters), or even using limited doses of fatigue, hunger, sleep deprivation or repetitiveness in indoctrination procedures to induce acceptance of political messages. But brainwashing as it is used here denotes the application of a whole range of psychiatric techniques to effect emotional confusion, pain and depression in a subject to get him to accept and verbally articulate ideas favorable to his captor.

While acknowledging our own lack of expertise in this field, we agreed that it appeared inappropriate to consider as brainwashing the political indoctrination given by the Vietcong to the tens of thousands of men in its armed forces or the hundreds of thousands of its civilian supporters among the Vietnamese population. The Vietcong has clearly been able to exploit various ingredients of coercive indoctrination in its propaganda aimed at the rural masses. Its near or complete monopoly of information media in certain areas is one ingredient, and another is its capacity to set into motion a vicious



cycle involving VC actions to create local insecurity, a consequent diminution of the confidence of the peasantry in local GVN officials, a deterioration in the performance of those officials, and so on and on. It appears that the VC even uses some of the other obvious stress factors noted above, such as fatigue and hunger. By these methods, the VC has been able to get across to the peasants a picture of political reality which is distorted, by objective standards, but which tends to become a less distorted and more nearly true depiction of local conditions as VC politico-military successes are further able to weaken GVN response capabilities and to provoke the GVN to less rational and even desperate and indiscriminate responses.

Thus the general pattern of political indoctrination observable in South Vietnam does not constitute true brainwashing which is characterized by reduction of individual autonomy and induced extreme dependence on external authority (the interrogator and behind him, the Party), although it is possible that the distinction here is quantitative rather than qualitative. The latter point would seem to be substantiated by certain remarks by Hoang Van Chi in From Colonialism to Communism, for example, about changes he observed in the psychological atmosphere of North Vietnam after the Vietminh takeover. These included reduced emotional affect, spontaneity and humor among the Vietnamese and an accompanying mechanical



quality and suspiciousness in interpersonal responses. (Chi mentions this only briefly and in relation to responses visible in public places, so the extent to which the process of deterioration of individual autonomy and spontaneity may have progressed in the home and intimate family relationships is impossible to assess.)

Certain persons are undoubtedly subject to regular brainwashing by the Vietcong. Evidently these include some of the few Americans now held in South Vietnam by the Vietcong (see the Jim Lucas story in the New York World Telegram, November 12, 1964 and the Albert Ravenholt article in the Washington Post for January 15, 1965). Given the continuing threat of capture by Communists facing Americans and others in various confrontations around the world, it behooves U.S. medical experts to try to develop prophylactic procedures against brainwashing. It is conceivable, for example, as Guy Pauker suggests, that our psychologists might be able to develop prophylactic "mental gymnastics" for use by persons whose official duties bring them unusually close to the threat of capture by the Communists and subjection to brainwashing.

Mr. Westbrook had mentioned in this connection that the greatest resistance to brainwashing has been shown by subjects who possess one or both of two particular attributes: a deep religious faith, and a sense of humor that enables them to "shuck off" efforts at indoctrinating them. He also had commented that ex-POW's from Korea who



had been brainwashed showed obvious symptoms of paranoia, including a typical pattern of apparently rational responses combined incongruously with other responses based on "a key delusion." This delusion in their cases was the belief that their enemy, the Chinese Communists, had become their friend, so those who exhibited the most pronounced symptoms of brainwashing had agreed to go along with the Chinese effort to make them "peace crusaders" willing to sign statements and make broadcasts condemning the United States for warmongering.

We agreed that in our own study of Vietcong motivation we might make a limited but potentially useful application of our laymen's understanding of this problem by probing the extent to which coercive aspects of Vietcong political indoctrination verge on a pattern suggestive of brainwashing. One principal reason for pursuing this is that attitudes and convictions inculcated by brainwashing tend to dissolve once the subject is removed from the isolated, highly manipulable situation required by the brainwasher. The subject tends to acquire or retrieve a perception of reality conforming more closely to his own objective conditions and to sense that he has been "lied to," "cheater" or "exploited" in the process. The gradual process of rejecting brainwashed idea content seems to be a more emotionally intense and qualitatively different reaction from a mere disillusionment with values one discards because they do not stand up to ordinary reality testing.



Because it is a more visible reaction than simple disillusionment, we should be able to identify it through our research, if it does indeed occur in Vietnam. And if it does, our research results very possibly could be used in the development of policies countering Vietcong indoctrination techniques of various kinds. Furthermore, because the process of recovery from brainwashing dramatizes poignantly the exploitation of human personality by the brainwasher, it might contribute policy guidance to USIA on ways to expose Vietcong methods.

We consider potentially useful the addition of a few additional questions to our interview schedule to try to ascertain the following:

(A) Cases in which subjects have experienced political indoctrination under obvious conditions of thought control, e.g., fatigue, hunger, sleep deprivation or prolonged low nutritional levels, conditions of deliberately induced and acute anxiety about their own future or that of their family, friends, nation, etc.

(B) Cases in which subjects appear to arrive at a genuine emotional and intellectual rejection of ideas and attitudes inculcated in them under such conditions because they associate the learned content with exploitation of themselves by the Vietcong indoctrination process.

Sample questions that might be used in Vietnam are the following. They should be discussed with our Vietnamese colleagues and modified in conformity with any suggestions they may have.



1) Did you or anyone you know ever receive political training (from the NLFSV, Lao Dong Party of North Vietnam, People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, etc.) while you (or he, etc.) were very tired, hungry, or under physical or emotional stress or pain? Describe in detail.

If so, did the sessions held under these conditions occur only occasionally, frequently, or always?

2) Were you generally very tired and/or hungry by the time the routine kiem thao [work and individual evaluation and criticism] sessions of your unit were held in the late afternoon?

3) Did you ever, occasionally or frequently, feel during the kiem thao or the less frequent political training sessions that the same points were being made with such repetitiousness or had been made previously with such frequency that you were very bored and were ready to accept the message immediately if only the leader would proceed to a new subject?

4) Have you ever felt during your Viet Minh or Front service or since your capture by (or defection to) the GVN that the ideas and attitudes taught you were false and that the VM or Front had cheated or exploited you in getting you to make sacrifices for those ideas?

One final point is that improvements in GVN policies of dealing with its Vietcong Prisoners of War could make much more fruitful this type of research and its utilization in terms of understanding VC indoctrination processes



and "awakening" captured and other Vietcong to the perception of a new reality in terms of comparatively favorable conditions existing on the GVN side, conditions contrasting drastically with those they had been led by VC indoctrination to expect. One of the most obvious needs, here again, is for the elimination of routine use of physical and emotional brutality against the POW's. For such mistreatment tends to provide them with a mutual antagonism to their captors, a new form of psychological cohesion with which to resist GVN efforts to elicit their cooperation, and perhaps ultimately the abandonment of some of their sedulously cultivated political prejudices. And brutality furnishes the POW's with additional evidence of reliability of a Vietcong indoctrination message, namely, that they would be so brutalized, if not killed, upon capture.